VOICES OF THE PANDEMIC: TEACHING ESL DURING COVID-19

Presented to
The Graduate Program
of
Greensboro College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in
Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

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December 2021

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 crisis, ESL teachers and administrators were at the forefront of another national emergency. One in which everything they had encountered before was toppled over, and one for which they had to do everything in their power to ensure that a generation of middle and high school students would not lose a crucial year of education. From the emergency remote switch in Spring 2020 to the full return to in-person learning in Fall 2021, educators and administrators faced constant changes and arduous challenges in every aspect of their work. This paper sheds light on those teaching realities as experienced by ESL stakeholders in the field. It summarizes research on the benefits and challenges of teaching during the crisis, and presents a documentary film created from the testimonies of three educators; their voices thus becoming a humanifying echo of the research and a tangible portrait of the realities lived by those "other" frontline workers.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my friends, my family, and my love who have encouraged and supported me throughout this new adventure.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Elena King for her encouragements, support, and guidance throughout the creation of this thesis project; Dr. Michelle Plaisance for leading the Master's in TESOL program and offering educators out there a chance to grow professionally; Dr. Paula Wilder for all her kindness, help, and support; Dr. Timothy Sims for his guidance and genuine care; and all the mentors and educators of this Master's program who made it such an enjoyable and rewarding educational experience.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

March 11, 2020: The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Soon after, the inbox of teachers across the world dinged with e-mail from administrators: their school was closing, all classes would switch to online.

The rapid, if not chaotic, transition presented an unprecedented set of challenges to English as a Second Language (ESL) educators and administrators. The technology needed to continue classes asynchronously had to be mastered promptly; questions related to maintaining the quality of instruction and engagement with and between students bubbled; mentoring, coaching, assessing, grading had to be hastily adapted to the new reality; scenes of seemingly controlled panic and disarray could be felt in e-mail and zoom sessions worldwide among educators (Mosavian, 2020). What was supposed to be a temporary fix to finish the 2019-2020 school year lasted an additional, entire school year.

Asynchronous teaching was, by no means, a new concept in the world of education in that fateful March 2020. Online learning had been around since the 1980s (Harasim, 2000; Moore & al., 2011) and thanks to a boost in popularity with the rise of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in 2011 (Voss, 2013), various educators and researchers at all levels and institutions had already experimented with online or hybrid courses in blended and distance learning (Moore & al., 2011). Studies on best practices for online teaching, as well as research on its benefits and pitfalls, are well documented: a plethora of research articles can be found on library databases and education journals.

However, the emergency switch to remote learning in March 2020 ushered a new set of difficult challenges not only for teachers used to face-to-face classes, but also for students used to engaging with class synchronously and in-person. Students were suddenly faced with an unfamiliar and delicate academic setting, and also with new social, family, personal environments and dynamics which could provoke challenges beyond regular class management for teachers and administrators (Daniel, 2020). Yet, given the continuing nature of the pandemic, the full- and long-term effects of the past pandemic school year, with its set of restrictions and extraordinary circumstances in the world of ESL, are still to be determined.

The aim of my research is to focus on the impacts witnessed directly by ESL educators and administrators in their first-hand experiences dealing with the extraordinary changes that the pandemic forced upon them. It is organized around thematic questions asked to public middle school and high school teachers and administrators during recorded, one-on-one Zoom meetings. The footage thus obtained is analyzed, condensed, and edited in order to create a film documentary. With careful planning and formulation of the initial questions, my interviewees' responses naturally elucidate overarching themes which narrate a story. In keeping with this semi-structured style of interview, the speakers make their own definition of the terms of "effects" and "impacts", "challenges" and "benefits" used in this chapter. These following routes are explored during the interviews:

- Availability of resources (pedagogical, mental, financial, technological);
- External influences on capacity to exercise the profession during the pandemic (familial/personal environment, support, work background);
- Presence and quality of relationships with students, colleagues, administrators;
- Development of relationship with parents;

- Collaboration between fellow educators;
- Assistance and support from administrators;
- Evolution in their students' progress during the school year;
- Efficacy of strategies and pedagogy practices employed by teachers to engage with students and keep students motivated and focused;
- Changes noticed in the return to in-person school;

The personal nature of the one-on-one interviews offer opportunities to delve deeper into issues presented by the speakers, which consequently enhance and narrow the content of the overarching themes. It is worth noting, however, that carrying such research presents deeply personal points of view based on individual experiences felt and lived by the interviewees.

In this documentary, I focus on public middle school and high school teachers and administrators because the realities which they faced provide a viewpoint different from my own experience with emergency remote teaching. I work in higher education, at an institution which was able to provide ample support to ensure that an effective teaching system would be in place to assist all faculty and students through the instability of the new environments that we faced. Yet, despite this support system, all of us felt the strain and the repercussions of the year and a half that followed. With this documentary, I sought to learn beyond the limits of my personal, constricted experience in order to give a voice to the other realities lived by my colleagues in public schools and to highlight the complex issues beyond the online nature of the teaching that had to be done.

To help balance, support or nuance the collected opinions, a comprehensive literature review introduces the documentary. It includes a review of the relevant articles published during the COVID-19 crisis on the emergency transition to remote teaching, the subsequent semesters,

as well as literature discussing online learning versus in-person learning published in pre-pandemic times. It is important to note that, given the communicative and community-based nature of a language class, the worlds of ESL and foreign languages presented their own set of specific challenges during this crisis (Drucker & Fleischhauer, 2021). This thesis and documentary aim to better illustrate the unique situations and realities of those “other” first responders of the pandemic: our public school, ESL educators and administrators.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Under normal circumstances, learning a foreign language can already feel like riding a rollercoaster, but when an international health crisis was added to the mix in March 2020, students, teachers and administrators witnessed an onslaught of twists and turns with consequences that left nobody unmoved. The in-depth analysis of the effects of the emergency switch from the traditional, in-person, face-to-face classes to a myriad of hastily put together online sessions worldwide is still pending. The number of studies documenting those effects were, at the time of writing (September 2021), still meager. This literature review focuses exclusively on articles published after March 2020, with a focus on the world of foreign languages and ESL.

The rise of online learning is not a new phenomenon (Harasim, 2000; Moore et al., 2011); however, planned online teaching needs to be crucially differentiated from the emergency remote language teaching (ERLT) (Angus et al., 2021) that forced all educators, whether accustomed to teaching online or not, to use a method of delivery which required a highly specific set of technological skills and online pedagogy (Drucker & Fleischhauer, 2021). This changed prompted an increase in literature focusing on online language pedagogy (Russell, 2020) which started to appear in language pedagogy forums and publications as early as April 2020, closely matching the demand from teachers worldwide for tips on designing interactive and effective online courses.

This literature review offers some clues to contextualize the realities of the pandemic remote teaching and learning faced by stakeholders in education in the past 18 months. In order to preface the documentary film presented as the core of my research thesis, findings from this literature review are organized in three sections: the good, which details research results pertaining to the positive effects of remote teaching; the bad, which highlights the areas in which pitfalls and failures occurred during the pandemic year; and the ugly, which concludes the review by describing the areas most severely affected by the disconnect and disparities created by the pandemic.

The good: Targeted support and resources for emergency online teaching

As stated in the introduction, ERLT brought a noticeable increase in needs for quick-to-implement online learning pedagogy. As Russell (2020) noted, a plethora of platforms, forums, organizations, and newly created communities started publishing best-practice articles to help anxious educators navigate the switch to remote teaching. Platforms such as the ACTFL Distance Learning Special Interest Group or the Basic Online Language Design and Development Collaboratory helped foster support groups and foster new bonds between teachers in ESL nationwide.

Some benefits at emergency remote teaching were especially more visible at some higher education institutions. At those which had trained their educators to be efficient online in pre-pandemic times and/or during the summer of 2020, several positive aspects were witnessed. Despite the short time to switch to an all-online delivery mode (in some extreme case, as short as two hours (Gacs & al., 2020)), a retention and even an increase in student enrollment were noticed, and in some cases, new teachers needed to be hired (Masavian, 2020).

Overwhelmingly, teachers at both higher ed institutions and middle/high schools who had acquired experience with online or hybrid courses before the pandemic had a much easier time to adapt to the new environment and to create compelling courses (Daniel, 2020; Drucker & Fleischhauer, 2021; Masavian, 2020). Materials, modes of communication, use of various online platforms for course delivery (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, Sakai, Moodle, and even Whatsapp (Alotaibi & Haron, 2021)) were integrated with much more efficacy and brought more comfort in the forced switch to ERLT. Angus et al. (2021) underline that the pandemic also helped teachers integrate and adopt more technology in their remote classes than they would have otherwise tested. This fact encouraged many in their decision to continue to use technology tools in their lesson planning for the future, with the hope to create more effective and engaging classes.

As a consequence of this earlier-than-planned adoption of various technology language learning tools, students (adults and middle/high schoolers) were exposed to new language platforms for learning and for practicing their second language, thanks to creative assignments which were beyond the reach of traditional, in-person classes (Bodis et al., 2020). Not only were their outlets for language production more varied, it also offered the possibility for teachers to give more in-depth feedback on different language skills used in online assignments, which could not have been similarly explored in a traditional classroom (Bodis et al., 2020). In addition, thanks to platforms that allowed classes to be recorded, some educators could, in turn, use those recordings to observe and analyze their own teaching strategies and patterns (as well as those of their willing colleagues) to find ways to improve student engagement and teaching pedagogy (Cho & Clark-Gareca, 2020).

It is worth noting, however, that a survey carried by Angus et al. (2020) shows that, despite a general consensus among tech-savvy and newly-convinced tech-loving educators at higher education institutions on the benefits of integrating technology in language classes, not all are ready to stay 100% online or to keep all online tools used when traditional, in-person classes resume. Self-confidence in the technology, the teacher's own performance during ERLT, and the overall stress felt while experimenting new online modes of class delivery are big factors that will influence their decisions for future implementation on online components in traditional, brick-and-mortar classes (Angus et al., 2020).

What surprised many college-level teachers who had successful emergency online courses is that those were sometimes found to be as effective as in-person classes. This is because certain qualities of online teaching are unique to that mode of learning: asynchronous components can allow students to take control of the lessons and be more autonomous (Bodis et al., 2020), thus fostering a sense of self-discipline and responsibility (Gavranović & Prodanović, 2020), and thus allowing more flexibility in attaining learning objectives for each unit at a pace that is adaptable to various learning styles (Bodis et al., 2020). Gavranović & Prodanović (2020) also stress that emergency remote learning was also easier to manage and was more time-saving for students who faced personal covid-related challenges and issues caused by the displacement caused by school closings. Due to this major change in the students' personal environments and their conditions for studying, an asynchronous delivery of classes was heavily recommended (Danjou, 2020) and institutions and educators who were able to accommodate students with such a format often saw positive student feedback on their learning experience during the Spring 2020 semester (Lucski et al., 2020). It is worth noting, however, that this solution was particularly

effective for college-level courses with adult students. Middle and high school educators faced a much different reality, as described in the last section of this review.

Educators who had access to efficient platforms for their subjects and internet access strong enough to hold synchronous, face-to-face meeting were also able to develop crucially needed social interactions and virtual bonds with students, colleagues, and administrators at a time of heavy isolation (DiSalvo & Ross, 2020; Lomicka, 2020). This helped to foster a sense of interconnectedness and collaboration in the height of isolation during the pandemic. For students, creating a virtual presence helped them feel included and engaged in class, thus lowering anxiety and stress levels, while also bolstering participation in the target language (Lomicka, 2020). For teachers and administrators, maintaining a two-way communication was also essential in order for all stakeholders to feel supported and heard during the chaos of the emergency switch and the subsequent remote semesters (Cho & Clark-Gareca, 2020). Angus et al. (2020) underline that, because humans have a natural yearning for communal gatherings, during the pandemic, a community of learning gave hope to many educators who otherwise felt alone or abandoned in their work. The encouraged collaboration between colleagues gave a support system in a time of heavy doubts, uncertainty for the future, and pedagogical trials and errors. Lomicka (2020) stresses that a "social presence is vital to the development of both cognitive and affective objectives as it can support critical thinking and engage learners in the social interaction process" (p.306), thus highlighting that those educators, students, and administrators who had such spaces during the online semesters were most likely to succeed and to find the motivation to continue to learn, teach, and lead.

An unexpected consequence of remote online teaching was in development of a new kind of parent-teacher relationship. The necessity to make sure that all students had access to reliable

computers, internet, and school materials helped some teachers to connect with hard-to-otherwise-reach parents (Shin, 2020). This was especially true for some of the immigrant students whose families were able to learn about the functioning of the US school system and the learning processes used in their children's classrooms which are usually out-of-sight (Braun & Sayer, 2020). To work through those new pandemic hoops, several ESL students were also required to use their English language skills in real life, especially when having to deal with challenges due to technology bugs, correct use of learning platforms, and new forms of communication tools, such as e-mail, which some students might not have had to use directly (Braun & Sayer, 2020). Teachers similarly gained valuable insight into the daily realities and challenges students had to face at home. Braun & Sayer (2020) think that "the connections forged between families and EL educators this spring will likely pay dividends for students down the road" (p.4). This is a connection which will hopefully bear educational and social results in the long term when students return back to school in person.

To conclude this section, one has to remember and mark the differences between planned online teaching which has been extensively studied, surveyed, and measured, versus emergency remote teaching. Although some of their benefits may overlap, Gacs et al. (2020) remind us that long-term effects on proficiency outcomes – as opposed to end-of-the-course achievements – of online learning still require more time and deeper analysis. This reminder is especially true of the online courses that resulted from ERLT. Given the on-going nature of the pandemic and that, at the time of writing, schools were only just reopening in person in most U.S. states, the full depth of the benefits of the pandemic on ESL learners and educators are still to be observed and determined.

The bad: When support systems break and resources fail

The switch to remote teaching forced an early "tech" conversion onto a significant number of teachers who had not been trained to use it or who had actively resisted implementation of it in their classes before the pandemic (Masavian, 2020). As a result, throngs of teachers experienced various difficulties in delivering their courses online which deeply affected their views of the efficacy of online teaching, which subsequently led many to develop negative sentiments towards future adoptions of any technological components in their courses (Angus et al., 2020). That negativity was often due to the precipitation early on in the pandemic to switch to online classes, which brought chaos to the chains of commands between administrators and teachers. Masavian (2020) indicated that the chaos manifested itself in the form of technological tools being added and then changed at the last minute (Teams to Zoom to Teams); the forced usage of certain online tools and platforms instead of others which were preferred by the general consensus of teachers; the rise in security and privacy concerns and how to best deal with potential future issues. A lack of clear commands from top to bottom, a break in the feeling of being heard, and a lack of adequate technological support caused mistrust and frustration (Okey, 2021). Several teachers experienced a sensation that everything had to be learned in real-time, which contributed to feelings of being unprofessional due to mediocrity of the resulting course design and quality, which exposed teachers to judgements from students (Blum, 2020). Angus et al. (2020) state that those challenges sometimes reinforced "a pre-ERLT view that online language teaching is a subpar teaching approach imposed by administrators who are only interested in cutting costs or promoted by peer educators who try to evade F2F teaching" (p.429). At some institutions, teachers were under the impression that the pandemic was used by some administrators as a decoy to make further budget cuts and to impose more

hours on a reduced number of teachers, further straining the trust bond between the two entities (Chambers & Gilmour, 2020).

The effects of the pandemic also affected the preparation of new ESL teachers, whose field experiences and observations had to be altered to meet the circumstances of the pandemic. To ensure proper support, many institutions guided their student teachers toward online resources such as the teachingchannel.com (Cho & Clark-Gareca, 2020) in order to expose preservice educators to as many in-class realities as possible. However, Cho & Clark-Gareca (2020) underline that

> […] while we believe that teacher educators did their best to approximate actual teaching and to implement innovative ideas, what became clear was that these alternative approaches could not completely replace what preservice teachers could have learned in real classrooms. As a consequence, it is predicted that there could be additional challenges for these preservice teachers when they teach actual class in their first year. (p.4)

This further emphasizes that, to learn certain skills, online education does not fully replace the reality of the classroom. The need to experience and work with a community, in person and face-to-face, may be essential. Angus et al. (2020) note that ERLT and the online semesters following it were especially inadequate for ESL learners and the specific needs associated with language learning (p.428). The levels of stress and anxiety – which can already run high when learning and speaking a foreign language in a traditional classroom – were heightened during ERLT due to various factors such as mastering the new technology, the new forms of instruction delivery, and the students' general situation at home (Russell, 2020). The lack of natural physical eye-contact, small-talk, body language and meaningful small gestures

which could help alleviate some misunderstandings in person were stripped in online classes (Avineri et al., 2020; Masavian, 2020). It contributed to a general sense of fatigue and a lack of motivation in some students and educators, further highlighting the essential human desire for social interactions to boost academic involvement and to stay focused (DiSalvo & Ross, 2020; Petronzi & Petronzi, 2020). The lack of human interaction led to feelings of isolation and instability in moods (Lucski et al., 2020), which, consequently, heightened levels of stress and anxiety and vice versa. Susan Blum (2020) notes:

> Humans are delicately attuned to each other's complete presence. If a perfectly tuned conversation provides a "vision of sanity," then it is no wonder that an awkward, clunky, interrupted conversation provides the opposite. We are constantly interpreting others' movements, timing, breaths, gazes, encouragement. (p.3)

The humanity of in-person interactions breeds sanity and calm, which allow for a heightened ability to focus and learn (Angus et al., 2020; Russell, 2020). The disconnect between the learners and teachers due to the online delivery of classes meant that keeping track of improvements, challenges, needs, and the ability to give appropriate feedback and mentoring were challenged (Ghosal, 2020).

The consequences of the year and a half of remote learning affected all sides of the learning process and of the school experience, but also revealed new facets of students' personal lives. Indeed, through the intrusion of webcams into the personal homes of the displaced students, some teachers were able to witness a world of inequalities and precarious environments for many learners (Ghosal, 2020). The divide between more privileged students and poorer ones became not only more apparent, it also revealed the inequalities related to the personal stress experienced during the pandemic, and the disconnect between the demands of school and the

realities of students' homes (DiSalvo & Ross, 2020). Deep disparities in internet connectivity and access were abundant and well-documented (Braun & Sayel, 2020; DiSalvo & Ross, 2020; Ghosal, 2020; Russell; 2020; Shin, 2020) and, unsurprisingly, they primarily affected minority and ESL students the most (Braun & Sayel, 2020; Shin, 2020). The heightened sense of isolation, disconnect, and lack of community during the remote learning impacted the category of students who already was the most at-risk to feel such conditions during regular school years. In his article, Henry Giroux (2020) points out that those inequalities are a result of long-term neglect by governments to support education systems:

> The current coronavirus pandemic is more than a medical crisis, it is also a political and ideological crisis. It is a crisis deeply rooted in years of neglect by neoliberal governments that denied the importance of public health and the public good while defunding the institutions that made them possible. At the same time, this crisis cannot be separated from the crisis of massive inequalities in wealth, income and power. Nor can it be separated from a crisis of democratic values, education and environmental destruction. (p.1)

These inequalities disproportionately affecting ESL students were handed down to the teachers to solve during remote teaching – with very limited support from higher powers to offer assistance to the most deprived students (Shin, 2020).

The availability, in some schools, of asynchronous classes in order to attempt to accommodate all students equally proved similarly problematic because such classes were often seen as more difficult due to a lack of direct guidance from the teacher, and they also required stronger dedication, focus, and more time to complete than synchronous classes (Guo, 2020). In cases when both synchronous and asynchronous versions of the same class were offered, studies

showed that students who could attend the synchronous classes gained more factual knowledge and earned better grades than their counterparts in asynchronous classes (Guo, 2020). On the teacher's side, designing effective and compelling synchronous and asynchronous classes was highly time-consuming and required well-crafted materials which may have been beyond the reach of most educators, especially those without much online experience or those facing their own set of personal difficulties at home (Gacs et al., 2020).

As a result, students who had to resort to asynchronous units to continue their learning faced even greater inequalities in their school performance and in their ability to continue through the school curriculum, especially during emergency remote teaching. As Russell (2020) notes:

> [M]any educators are operating in a triage mode, attending only to the most important learning outcomes and providing instruction using whatever tools and resources to which they and their students have access. It is important to note that economically disadvantaged students and students in rural areas without access to hardware and/or the Internet are at a greater disadvantage during the 2020 school closures because they likely only have access to instruction by mail, if at all. (pp.339-340)

The inequality in steady access to classes during the pandemic school years introduced several questions on the long-term consequences of this lapse in reliable, solid, and thorough instruction, which learners – especially ESL learners at the forefront of the disparities and various challenges explained above – will face in the year(s) to come.

The ugly: Teacher fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic

The on-going nature of the pandemic is harboring feelings of uncertainty that are

continuing to affect all ESL stakeholders. This coupled with the lack of available data and research currently published on the long-term effects of the past year and a half means that implementing necessary steps to help all students and educators readjust and catch up are yet to be determined. Areas affected may range from feelings of having "falling behind" to more dire ones such as mental strain, irreparable educational and personal damage, social disconnect, and inability to potentially ever make up with what was lost.

No matter how much enthusiasm and support educators and administrators were able to provide to each other and to students, disparities in socioeconomical resources have further separated the "haves and the have-nots" (Shin 2020). Braun and Sayer (2020) add that schools which generally have the most ESL learners were also the least well-equipped and well-funded ones, even prior to the pandemic. Those disparities meant less technological resources and equipment, less instructional technology support, and a more restricted access to educational platforms which were not available for free, open access. The authors also highlight that most online platforms for remote learning were not designed with ESL learners in mind, thus increasing the chances of a disconnect between the needs of an ESL class and the tools available to educators to make their courses interactive and engaging (Braun & Sayer, 2020).

Another major, more personal issue faced by ESL students from less privileged backgrounds is linked to the necessity to support their families while also supporting their education. In school where synchronous classes were offered, students could encounter issues not only in terms of access to reliable internet as mentioned in the previous section, but also in terms of juggling between synchronous classes and their part-time or full-time jobs which they had to take to support to their family hit by the high unemployment caused by the shutting down of the economy (Guo, 2020). Erratic work hours and schedules became a block to full

commitment to school work, despite best efforts from educators and administrators to reach out to students and their families. Braun and Sayer (2020) underline that a challenge lied in keeping students not only engaged, but also present in class. Some students too often had to make the difficult decision to choose between school and employment. For some other students who were spared the need to make that decision, another issue arose: educators faced was the impossibility to reach their parents to give the guidance needed to help their children with schoolwork and to share best-practices for homeschooling. Many of those parents were working in sectors designated as "essential" and therefore could not be present to assist their students in their studies (Braun & Sayer, 2020).

In other instances where parents were available, language barriers often interrupted the possibility to offer assistance to go through the many steps needed to make technology function for synchronous and asynchronous work, but also to offer help with explaining tasks and assignments to the students, and to monitor progress throughout the year from another perspective than the limited teacher's viewpoint. Families with different home languages than the ones supported by schools were also enable to receive proper information (Braun & Sayer, 2020). This break in conversation and connection between teachers and the students' parents who could have played the role of schoolwork supervisors meant that certain students were forced to be more, if not entirely, independent and responsible for their studies at an age when motivation and concentration levels may vary greatly if distractions come in the way (Lucski et al., 2020). This factor was also coupled with the fact that ERLT often switched the emphasis placed on certain language skills used in traditional classes. Those tend to rely more heavily on listening and speaking while online classes focus more on reading and listening due to a lack of

flexibility to talk and share with peers in a more unformal manner. This is underlined by Braun & Sayer (2020):

> [This shift] affected ELs at the primary level who were emergent readers, since they could not receive the one-to-one or small group instruction required to build early fundamental skills of reading through scaffolded oral interactions. Online instruction meant the loss of this type of differentiated learning supported through oral interactions. At the secondary level, the heavy emphasis on reading in remote learning made it even more difficult for ELs because reading skills in particular take much more time to develop before they can be used solely as the means of content instruction. (p.3)

The on-going nature of the pandemic means that time is still needed to fully collect and analyze the effects of a year and a half of emergency remote teaching on all stakeholders in education. Alvarado (2021) deftly underlines some of the major impeding issues facing students and educators by highlighting that the early results of analyses conducted in the field show that students are behind, especially among minorities, and that, for now, the task is left to educators to fix. The article also stressed that students who dropped out, who disenrolled, or in some cases, did not even enroll again for the new school year in the Fall of 2020, may either never return or come back with a significant delay, which could potentially affect their entire future career and even our society as a whole. This may also have an impact on school statistics on enrollments and on educators facing the task of teaching students significantly behind for their age groups.

At this point in time, further studies are required to survey the extent of the damage caused by ERLT and the subsequent remote year on educators and their students, and especially minorities who were the most affected by the dire changes required by the health crisis. The disparities, if not fully identified and remedied, will continue to grow and create a starker divide

between privileged and disadvantaged. With schools only just reopening at the time of writing, the psychological effects affecting all students, educators, and administrators need to be at the center of a national focus, and actions should be taken in order for all stakeholders to feel heard and supported, and to be better equipped to deal with the consequences of our new pandemic world.

Chapter 3: Project Design

This chapter serves the purpose of explaining the rationale and the procedure with which the documentary was created. Several reasons supported the need to use the medium of a film documentary: the nature of the topic which involves human subjects; the somewhat intimate nature of the speakers' testimonies; a need to connect with those who share their stories by seeing and hearing them; and a desire to have honest, unscripted answers to questions asked during the interview. These ideas are highlighted by Friend and Caruthers (2016) who note that "[f]ilm captures authentic voices and lived experiences of students, educators, and community members with diverse perspectives" (p.34). A video documentary thus exposes the spectrum of human emotions without filters. It also enables the viewers to create their own meaning of the topics presented, despite the guidance from the director/interviewer (Friend & Caruthers, 2016).

The hope with a film documentary is to produce a final project which is easier and more convenient to share and to view (as opposed to using a paper or print media such as articles in periodicals, for example), thus allowing for a broader reach into educational communities and other places of interest. To do so, and to properly execute the production of this documentary, careful and minute preparation was needed before the process of interviews could be started.

For this documentary, a rather formal style of interviewing was used. I use the definition of "formal" as defined in the article by Sacchi (2015) in which he explains that in such interviews, the speaker is seated and that there is some control over the environment where the filming takes place. The limitations of carrying out the recordings on Zoom restricted the

director's choices of different locales (a school, an office, a classroom) or using specific lighting to create specific moods which could influence the viewers. The Zoom recordings used to create the final documentary, by their lack of potentially "appealing" cinematography, thus hopefully encourage the viewers to build their own meaning by focusing more intently on the choices of words, the intonations, and the emotions on the faces of the speakers as they develop their answers in real time – as opposed to being heavily influenced by flashy cinematography. In those elements, coupled with the viewers' own experiences, lie the power of video to highlight and illustrate the subjects of the documentary. As noted by Friend and Caruthers (2016):

> The viewer sees images and listens to the voices of documentary film participants, filtering this through prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. Voice may be defined as meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community. Voice suggests relationships: the individual's relationship to the meaning of his/her experience. (p.37)

A documentary allows for the human aspect to shine and for the viewers to relate with the experiences described by the speakers.

Although there is a desire to transcribe the realities presented by the speakers as closely as intended by them, it is undeniable that the post-production of a documentary organizes the answers and clips in a certain way which is at the director's subjective discretion. Sachhi (2015) notes that pre-planning involves having a clear vision of the final documentary (its message, its morality, but also its aesthetics, its style, etc.) before all filming happens. This is important to keep in mind when the director is faced with the need to make meaning of the answers provided by the speakers and to organize hours of recording in a comprehensible way. The choice to include certain soundbites, specific parts of those answers, or to cut others entirely out come

from the intention to tell a clearer and more compelling story which can, as a result, become a more accessible narrative for the viewers. Despite the director's touch, the intention behind the documentary's editing is to still leave room for critical reflection and for personal interpretations.

Ultimately, this documentary's aim is to give a voice to teachers who were at the educational forefront of the international health crisis. Their stories, as shared truthfully and with honesty directly by the interviewees, may help to place a spotlight on an area of our society which still needs much research and national focus. There exists a need to document the teaching experiences and the disparate realities faced by ESL teachers in class during the pandemic. This documentary hopes to start collecting and archiving, for education purposes, the voices and testimonies of ESL teachers at the public, middle/high school levels on remote teaching through the COVID-19 pandemic. What's more, the interviewers, by offering their stories, get a chance to communicate directly with viewers who may then decide to act upon the knowledge received. As a result, the power of their truthful storytelling could also offer guidance to start a path forward towards offering solutions to address some of the issues presented.

Chapter 4: Voices of the Pandemic: Teaching ESL during COVID-19

The Documentary Project

In creating this documentary for my thesis project, I had the privilege to interview three incredibly generous stakeholders in the world of ESL who were at the forefront of the emergency switch to online learning in March 2020. All three lived through the subsequent unique, chaotic changes and developments, all the way to the eventual return to in-person teaching in the Fall of 2021. The three, roughly 60-minute interviews, were filled with personal and powerful testimonies which were compiled and edited to create a 38-minute documentary film which presents and intertwines their voices and stories of teaching ESL during COVID-19. At times, they shared laughter and good-humor, while at others, deep reflections and tears. Feelings of hope and optimism were balanced by uncertainty, stress, and a fear of the unknown for the future. In creating this documentary, I not only hoped to discover other pandemic teaching realities than my own, but I also wished to record this moment in our recent history where educators were at another forefront of the national crisis: education.

Here are those three "heroes", and these are their stories.

The interviewees (in alphabetical order)

Katie Elliott: English Learner Teacher and Department Chair at Rocky River High School

Given her double role as a teacher and Department Chair at Rocky River High School, Mrs. Elliott's unique position enabled her to share insights on both the realities of classroom teaching and administrative management at her school level during the pandemic. Her career in ESL took her to Japan, the YMCA, and now to the public high school system in the Charlotte, NC area. Her dedication to student-learning, to ESL pedagogy, and to the well-being of her colleagues helped her power through the heartwarming ups and the challenging downs of the online school year and the current, in-person year this Fall 2021. She brought to the interview an honest, unabridged, and raw perspective into the realities of the crisis in education that teachers experienced this past year and a half.

Philip Keller: English as a Second Language Teacher at a public school in Greensboro, NC

Born in Ghana from a Swiss father and Californian mother, and educated in an international school in Accra until the age of 10 after which he moved to North Carolina, Mr. Keller's life is from inception colored with an international influence, an experience of being from a different culture, and a need to adapt to a new

environment. He currently works at a public high school in Greensboro, NC, where he helps newly arrived immigrant teenagers transition from a newcomer placement to the local high school system. His authentic retelling of teaching ESL during the pandemic and the return to in-person a year later proved to be an invaluable addition to the documentary, often with a touch of critical thinking, reflection, and much-needed humor.

Dr. Timothy Sims: Director of Federal Programs at Hickory Public Schools

Thanks to his current position as a high-level administrator for the Hickory Public School system in Hickory, NC, Dr. Sims shared that he is able to use his skills in educational pedagogy, management, and in ESL to support and make a difference in more lives. His genuine care for people and his level of personal involvement in bringing assistance to his staff and educators under his jurisdiction during the crisis have both been his personal lifeline to make it through the pandemic and his professional motto throughout his 30-year career in education. His experience in schools coupled with his personality brought an indispensable touch of philosophy and optimism to the documentary.

The documentary analysis

The force with which each of the interviewees' stories resonated, exemplified, and underlined the arguments presented in the Chapter 2 of this thesis is remarkable. Unbeknownst to them, all three made reference to the core elements from the three sections of that Chapter while

they went into retrospective monologues about their experience from March 2020 to the day of the interview. Gradually, their stories elucidated the arguments discussed by the researchers, scholars, and journalists in my literature review, and I hope to have effectively exemplified those arguments and expressed those views through the interviewees' voices in the final cut of the documentary.

To begin, despite the high anxiety-inducing reality of teaching ESL during the pandemic, Mrs. Elliott, Mr. Keller, and Dr. Sims noted some clear benefits which echoed the ones that I had encountered in the research. For instance, Mr. Keller stressed that COVID-19 forced a switch to online platforms, which ushered new online pedagogies (Russell, 2020) and opportunities to enhance the class pedagogy and to vary activities, which could satisfy both the teachers' and the students' engagement and skill-levels in class. He and Mrs. Elliott also recalled the importance of making a difference between the nature of emergency online teaching and the quality of planned online learning (Angus et al., 2020). They acknowledged the fact that many teachers were heavily unprepared before the switch and struggled to adapt to the new environment. Despite those initial challenges, Mr. Keller shared that some teachers now feel much more confident with technology than ever before and he thanks to switch for it. Both Mrs. Elliott and Mr. Keller considered themselves among those teachers, and they have decided to keep certain online activities and platforms in their in-person lessons this Fall. This is especially made easy, Mr. Keller notes, given the recrudescence of new online platforms specifically designed with ESL educators in mind (Daniel, 2020) and the fact that all students now have a laptop and that schools are better equipped with stronger Wi-Fi.

Another beneficial lifeline that all three interviewees mentioned was the importance of having an online presence and virtual community of learning with fellow colleagues and school

staff (Lomicka, 2020), especially in the height of the isolation of the pandemic. Dr. Sims started a daily email listserv which he wrote every morning to all of his staff and school boards. He shared news (good and challenging) and gave guidance and advice as he collected them through his readings. The goal, he explained, was ultimately to connect people in that time of high disconnect and isolation, by remaining honest, authentic, and human. It also helped keep a conversation going between administrators and teachers at a time when communication was key to remaining engaged (Cho & Clark-Gareca, 2020). Mrs. Elliott and Mr. Keller both indicated that Zoom hangouts were highly beneficial, especially in the first few weeks of the switch to remote (before Zoom fatigue (DiSalvo & Ross, 2020) became "a thing", as Mrs. Elliott said), in order to share best practices and to remain connected with their colleagues. It helped them remain inspired and motivated, despite the general confusion and chaos.

Another aspect in the positive side of the crisis is that school district administrators were and still are very much aware of the brutality of the work that fell upon ESL educators during the pandemic, and their unique circumstances in devising every possible strategy to keep teaching a vital skill to minority students. Dr. Sims was deeply moved at times during his interview, especially when recalling the courage and dedication exhibited by teachers even though "their whole apple cart was turned upside down", as he mentioned. Thanks to his power of decision-making and his ability to enact changes on a broad scale in the Hickory school system, many specialists in pedagogy, psychology, and child behavior and development were hired to come support teachers and students this Fall. Mrs. Elliott also mentioned that that kind of help was now present at her school, and it was such a needed addition. Action was needed and it is now taking place in certain schools (Alvarado, 2021) and Dr. Sims attested to that fact in his interview.

On the topic of parent-teacher relationships, the three interviewees indicated that the issues created by remote learning forced some connections with parents which might not have happened in regular times (Shin, 2020). Because of several issues (the top one being attendance), Mrs. Elliott and Mr. Keller had to contact and, at times, pay visits to parents whose ESL students were consistently missing class or having severe academic issues. Some of those meetings were only possible thanks to the use of interpreters (Spanish, Vietnamese, Swahili, etc.). The visits helped teachers get familiar with a few of their students' personal backgrounds by discovering the challenges behind the issues, which could explain, sometimes, the behaviors of those students (Braun & Sayer, 2020).

Without much surprise, the interviewees shared a list of grievances on the downsides and challenges of remote teaching and the return back to in-person teaching which often surpassed or counterbalanced the number of benefits. One of the most constant and significant issues which all three speakers faced is related to the technology: the tragedy of weak and cutting internet connectivity (Lucski et al., 2020; Mosavian, 2020), the security issues related to the use of Zoom for delivering classes and tests (Ockey, 2021), especially at the beginning when Zoom bombing and impersonation of other students were common, and the overall Zoom fatigue (DiSalvo & Ross, 2020). Mrs. Elliott mentioned that her school had to quickly publish new guidelines to circumvent those issues and to adapt to changing circumstances (platforms, activities, etc.), which only just added more chaos to the list of frantic changes which had to be implemented. Dr. Sims underlined several times that administrators did the best that they could to get informed on the latest trends, to gather scientific and pedagogical knowledge, and to publish the appropriate guidelines for each arising issue. However, given the constantly changing nature of the crisis, the back-and-forth and the potential additions or withdrawals of measures were undoubtedly difficult

on all educators, which Dr. Sims acknowledged. He also recognized that errors were made, and, with hindsight, that certain decisions might not have been the best ones (such as introducing the need to teach both online and in-person at the same time once kids were allowed back in person). Mr. Keller also mentioned that the ever-changing rules and additions of new tasks and responsibilities were one of the most challenging and tiring aspects of the past few months online. He stressed that both teachers and students found themselves forced to use entirely new tools without much, if any, prior training (Blum, 2020) and it proved to be strongly demoralizing at times.

Although some aspects of online learning will stay with educators forever, as Dr. Sims said, all three emphasized that online learning did not replace in-person education (Cho & Clark-Gareca, 2020; Angus et al., 2020). The colossal number of absences, often questionably justified as Mr. Keller indicated, and of students simply dropping school in the past year and a half was telling of how much online learning did not work for many ESL students (Alvarado, 2021). The essence of a language implies a need for community, socialization, and in-person exchanges, which boosts motivation and the ability to focus as well as an overall feeling of health and sanity (Blum, 2020; DiSalvo & Ross, 2020; Petronzi & Petronzi, 2020). Mrs. Elliott and Mr. Keller noted that the inability to require students to have their webcams and microphones on during online classes not only meant that creating a sense of community was nearly impossible, they also commented that it vastly contributed to the feeling among students that online learning was not "real school". As a consequence, several students missed class regularly or simply disappeared for long stretches of time (as Mr. Keller said). Dr. Sims explained that it was a very demoralizing factor for many ESL teachers in the community because they had spent countless hours creating high-quality content for their classes, only to find out that very few students were

attending class and could benefit from their dedication to teaching well despite the circumstances. It thus became an impossible chain of issues to break: a lack of attendance made it challenging to have meaningful social interactions online; those were crucial to strengthen students' interest and focus; a lack of which caused students to increasingly miss more classes. In the end, teachers often found themselves having to triage among students and tend to the ones who had the most resources to make online teaching work (Russell, 2020). Mr. Keller estimated that online learning worked for roughly only 30% of his students.

The absence of certain students could also be attributed to a vast disparity of inequality in economic resources among students and their families (Russell, 2020) and access to the essential tools needed for online learning: reliable internet (preferably via Wi-Fi), and a laptop. Mrs. Elliott, Mr. Keller, and Dr. Sims discussed the measures that were taken to make sure that no student was left behind (such as the distribution of free laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots, the dispatch of interpreters to help family set it all up, the creation of video tutorials to explain how to use the technology, the deployment of community liaisons to make sure all students had their school materials at home with them). Despite those extraordinary measures, several students were still unable to keep up with school work due to several impeding factors: having never seen or used a laptop before, being too remote from any source of reliable internet and cell coverage, a lack of ability for parents to tutor and monitor their child's school due to work, and most importantly (as stressed by Mr. Keller), an overall and plain lack of desire and motivation from a few students to attend online school. The divide between the haves and the have-nots became vividly apparent and disproportionately affected ESL students (Braun & Sayel, 2020; Shin, 2020), which all three speakers commented on profusely in their interviews. The lack of interest for this "fake school" as coined by Mr. Keller, coupled with a need to support families ushered a desire, if not a need,

in students to take jobs (Braun & Sayel, 2020; Guo, 2020). As a result, the task of keeping students engaged and motivated to attend school became even more difficult, if not irrelevant, because it could not compete with the need or the appeal to earn an income.

In a last segment, the information shared by the interviewees on their experience with the return to in-person school this Fall 2021 was both heartwarming and disconcerting. Mrs. Elliott and Mr. Keller emphasized the general euphoria in both students and educators to be back. The joy of being together again, of being able to be theatrical, to use body gestures and unspoken communication (Avineri et al., 2020), and to share small and big talk face to face have all revived a passion to teach in teachers, and a desire to "go to school" in students (Mr. Keller comically explained that fact in his interview). Still, both Mrs. Elliott and Dr. Sims pointed out that a certain lack of parental supervision and of in-person learning for the past academic year meant that there were now definite gaps (Alvarado, 2021). Those can be seen not only in student' academic results (both speakers mentioned that data was being collected in their school districts), but also in terms of socializing and rules related to living with one another again. Mrs. Elliott mentioned new forms of discipline issues which prompted her to aptly say that it was as if students had forgotten "how to do school", and Dr. Sims listed the different specialists that were being hired for the Hickory school systems in order to tackle those new psychological, pedagogical, and social challenges. The lingering stress and anxiety started during the height of the pandemic could still be felt, as all three interviewees noted, but the joy and relative ease of being able to work in person again superseded those feelings, at least for now.

As a conclusion, the experience of teaching during the pandemic illustrated by Mrs. Elliott's, Mr. Keller's, and Dr. Sims's compelling interviews is one marked overall by challenges, hardships, and disconnect, despite the best and remarkable efforts made by all ESL

stakeholders to continue to serve the students and the communities to which they committed their professional lives. The pandemic took a heavy toll on the world of education, and specifically on ESL teachers and learners whose very nature required the elements that were most attacked by the pandemic: community, connection, and clear communication. The interviewees shared an honest picture of the realities they experienced, the challenges they witnessed, the ups that motivated them to keep going, and the downs which made them question their role in this situation. The "new normal" is definitely not normal yet, and may never be again, as Mrs. Elliott and Dr. Sims explained. The stress, anxiety, and fear caused by the onslaught of the pandemic still linger. The depth of the gaps in education are yet to be fully studied and analyzed. The full effects on mental health for both students and teachers are yet to be determined. Dr. Sims's thoughtful wisdom shared at the end of the documentary offers a glimmer of hope towards a brighter future in the world of ESL: "It is okay for things just to be horrible, and know that it will get better. […] We will keep going, and we will get through it".

The full documentary can be viewed here:

https://youtu.be/0ShFlmj3ji0

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Chapter 5: Conclusion

In pursuing this research project for my master's thesis, I set out to do more than complete a requirement. I wanted to break out of the isolation of my own experience with emergency and planned online teaching, and reach out to fellow colleagues in the world of language teaching in order to learn about an experience and a reality different than my own. I was yearning to create connections with ESL educators in order to educate myself on the perspectives of others in the field in this crisis. With every step of this project, feelings of gratefulness and admiration for the work of all stakeholders in ESL were multiplied. Their dedication and unabated courage to offer the best of their pedagogical skills to students guaranteed that not all would be lost during the online school year. Not only did they strive for quality in their craft, they also worked hard to keep a touch of humanity and connection with their communities at school and in their personal lives, thus guaranteeing as much stability as possible in their work. I am indebted to my three interviewees for their generosity and their honesty. The power of their testimonies is an endless source of inspiration which will continue to resonate with me, and hopefully, with the readers and viewers of this research.

Katie Elliott, Philip Keller, and Dr. Timothy Sims shared more than their personal experiences. They underlined patterns of challenges met by educators and administrators nationwide starting from March 2020 onward. The challenges were numerous and often overwhelming: a widespread lack of reliable access to internet; inefficient technology and platforms for ESL needs; a sense of disconnect from one another in a subject which breeds

essentially on community; and an overwhelming feeling of discouragement when new changes kept being made, more work was being added, and no end to it all could be in sight. However, the interviewees' natural optimism also underlined some vital reminders of the good sides, especially in the return to in-person schooling: the stronger emphasis on mental health and educational needs now taking place in schools, the growth in access to technology and more suitable platforms for ESL, the general euphoria among all teachers and students to be back at school, and last but not least, the found-again essential human bond that connects us.

Through this research and the documentary created from the speakers' stories, I hope to give a voice to ESL teachers and administrators who lived through the challenges of teaching during COVID-19. Ultimately, through this thesis, I hoped to highlight the importance of the role of teachers in students' lives. Passion for teaching brings interest and engagement in a topic, and as a result, it can instill a desire to learn and to discover more beyond the basic requirements of a grade, thus possibly opening doors which can lead to different and better life opportunities. This is especially true for the world of ESL since it gifts students with a life-long language skill and a formidable key to more effective communication between people, and perhaps down the line, to higher critical thinking. It can prove to be an essential skill in helping to create more independent thinkers and global citizens in a society where an omnipresent plurality of information, sources, and opinions exist and compete for attention.

As noted in the research, the road to recovery and to a clearer definition of the "new normal" are still to be determined. From the literature review and the speakers' testimonies, it is easy to see that the return to in-person teaching this Fall 2021 has put a spotlight on significant gaps in students' learning growth, often due to socioeconomic disparities among the student population. This might be one of the most worrying aspects for the future, since a divergence of

path this early in a young student's life may have enormous impacts in terms of access to higher education, better jobs, steady and equitable income, good healthcare, etc.

This project highlights that the deep complexity of a teacher's work remains, even more so now that in-person school has resumed. To have to catch up on a year of online learning tainted with inequalities, while also pursuing the current school year's curriculum, are yet again a new and impossible challenge that is falling on the shoulders of educators and administrators. It is one that will require time, careful study, and prompt political support and action in order to make sure that no student or teacher is left behind. On a hopeful note, it makes no doubt that teachers and administrators will, once again, do everything in their power to make it work.

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